

PREACHERS OR POLITICIANS  
THE RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALIST CONSERVATIVE  
MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

A Research Paper

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by

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## **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense.

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## *Preface*

Religious fundamentalism can be manifested in many ways. All religious fundamentalists have varying religious traditions, cultures, and histories. However, despite these differences, they share certain general tendencies. That is, fundamentalists seek to preserve their religious heritage, they look to religious traditions for guidance, and they resist changing habits and beliefs in order to keep up with changing times.

This Air Command and Staff research project examines the phenomenon of religious fundamentalist political activism from an American perspective. Specifically, it compares two organizations within the religious conservative fundamentalist movement—the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. The paper discusses why these organizations involved themselves in politics, what direction their political activities took, and the reasons for their success or failure. In addition, the paper seeks to prove the theses that states: When religious fundamentalists involve themselves in politics, success dictates they sacrifice their fundamentalist tendencies in order to gain political power, often to the extent they can no longer define themselves as fundamentalists.

## *Abstract*

This research paper analyzes, religious fundamentalism and its relationship to politics from an American perspective.

Chapter 1 defines the scope of the research, which consists of an analysis of the modern religious conservative fundamentalist movement. It compares the political activities of two organizations within this movement—the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Chapter 2 provides an historical background concerning the rise of the modern religious conservative fundamentalist movement. Chapter 3 analyzes the Moral Majority and the concept of coercion. Chapter 4 analyzes the Christian Coalition and the concept of Union. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of my research findings and conclusions.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Fundamentalism: A tendency, a habit of mind, found within religious communities and paradigmatically embodied in certain representative individuals and movements.*

—M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby  
*Accounting for Fundamentalisms*

All Fundamentalist movements, whether they be Islamic or Christian, share certain general tendencies. This is true despite differences in ideology, social composition, size, organization, or influence. The most important tendency is that they want to preserve their particular religious heritage. In addition, they look to their religious traditions for guidance in dealing with problems, they do not propose new ideas, nor do they want to change their habits and beliefs in order to keep in step with changing times.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentalists, in order to preserve their distinct and exclusive identity as a group, tend to employ certain strategies when they feel themselves or their religious communities are at risk.<sup>2</sup> One such strategy is to involve themselves in politics. Fundamentalists take political action as a way to resist what they perceive to be a personal intrusion of the state.

Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, in *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, state, that when fundamentalists play politics, their involvement may eventually alter their distinctive identity to such a degree that the word fundamentalism, and what it connotes, may no longer apply.<sup>3</sup> What often happens is that

fundamentalists lose their exclusivity and, as a result, end up being a reflection of the very society they have set out to change.<sup>4</sup>

If Martin and Appleby's proposition is true, why then do fundamentalists involve themselves in political activities, and furthermore, once they have taken this step, what determines their success or failure?

This paper will examine these questions from an American perspective by discussing and comparing two American religious conservative movements, the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition.

I have chosen to compare the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition for two reasons. First, I wish to explore the concepts of coercion and union. These concepts, developed by John Garvey in his essay, *Introduction: Fundamentalism and Politics*, explain the reasons why fundamentalist movements involve themselves in politics, and the direction that their political action takes. The Moral Majority's political activities serve to illustrate the concept of coercion, which Garvey defines as the rejection of religious freedom.<sup>5</sup> The Christian Coalition is illustrative of Garvey's concept of union, the rejection of the idea of separation.<sup>6</sup> Second, this comparison will help to explain reasons why American fundamentalists, who become politically active, either succeed or fail in achieving their political objectives.

Finally, my research seeks to confirm Marty and Appleby's theses as it applies to American fundamentalism. That is, that participation in politics alters the distinctive identity that characterizes fundamentalism, often to the extent that they can no longer be defined as fundamentalist movements.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John H. Garvey, "Introduction: Fundamentalism and Politics," in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>3</sup>M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby, *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup>Garvey, 22.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 22.



## Chapter 2

### Why Do Fundamentalists Choose Politics?

Religious fundamentalists want to preserve their religious heritage and identity. They are exclusionist and conservative, and as such, prefer to rely on their own religious traditions, rather than public policy, for social guidance.<sup>1</sup> Why then, do fundamentalists become politically active?

John H. Garvey, in his essay, *Introduction: Fundamentalism and Politics*, says that in regard to religious political activism, fundamentalist movements can be divided into two groups—those that react to change, or threats to attempt to change their national religious identity, and those that react in opposition to the government or government efforts to maintain or expand the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

An example of the first group, those reacting to attempts to change their religious identities are the Haredim in Israel. The Haredim consists of Jews who observe a strict form of orthodox Judaism. In this instance, the fear of a new society, dominated by a different religion or faith, or even worse, a society that becomes more pluralistic or secular, has caused them to become politically active.<sup>3</sup>

The enemy of these types of movements, and the focus of their opposition is usually a well-defined group. In the case of the Haredim, the group that they are opposing is the

secular society that threatens to extract the redemption of the Jewish people from God's hands.<sup>4</sup>

The second group, according to Garvey, reacts to internal change and government efforts to expand the public sphere in an existing nation state without changing territorial boundaries.<sup>5</sup> He includes in this category, the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Groups in Egypt, and the popular revolution in Iran.<sup>6</sup> Movements in this category generally focus their attention inward, on issues of social reform. They view their enemy, not as a group, but as a way of thinking. In Iran, fundamentalists were reacting to the idea or philosophy of modernization. The popular fundamentalist movement's reaction to several decades of policies aimed toward modernizing the country led to an overthrow of the shah. The shah's overthrow was a response to policies that fundamentalists believed were downplaying the Islamic aspects of Iranian religious identity.<sup>7</sup>

Examining Garvey's concepts from an American point of view, the modern religious conservative fundamentalist movement fits into the latter category. As Garvey notes, since World War II, the government, and in particular the federal government, has been seen as interfering in areas previously considered personal and private. This is a particularly sensitive issue in the area of education and family life.<sup>8</sup> The Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition feel the government has given special treatment to secular society. They view their enemy as the idea or philosophy of secular humanism.

The tenants of secular humanism state that: "Every person is entitled to his or her own judgment concerning moral questions; one should do whatever one wants within reasonable limits; all moral judgments are relative, based on the situation; and the relation between absolute moral claims and each person's freedom is dialectical and tilts toward

the latter.”<sup>9</sup> Just as in the case of the popular fundamentalist movement in Iran in which government policies drove modernization, United States government policies were perceived as being driven by secular humanist doctrine. To conservative fundamentalists, this doctrine is seen as downplaying the Christian aspects of American religious identity.

The degree to which religious activists choose to participate politically varies according to their religious ideology, size, prospect for success, type of government, and social structure. Also varied is the impact and the degree of success activists have had in bringing about their desired social changes.<sup>10</sup>

Garvey maintains that the political direction a religious fundamentalist group will take generally follows one of three directions. The first direction is exit and involves totally withdrawing from society. The second direction is coercion. Coercion rejects the notion of the public and private distinction. The public and private distinction holds that the government should only exercise authority over matters that concern everyone in common but should refrain from meddling in individual affairs.<sup>11</sup> Taken to its ultimate, coercion not only brings religion into public life, but seeks to eliminate the private sphere altogether. The third direction is union, which attempts to change the existing society rather than exit it or eliminate the private sphere. In the case of union, fundamentalists will attempt to accomplish change through means of compromise and accommodation.<sup>12</sup> This paper will focus on the concepts of coercion and union in its examination of the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John H. Garvey, “Introduction, Fundamentalism and Politics,” in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol

## Notes

4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 22

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 21

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>9</sup>Samuel S. Hill and Dennis E. Owen, *The New Religious-Political Right In America*, (Nashville: Abingdon, c1982), 17.

<sup>10</sup>Marty and Appleby, 22.

<sup>11</sup>Garvey, 14.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 22.

## Chapter 3

### Historical Background

In order to understand Garvey's concepts of coercion and union within an American frame of reference, it is important to provide a brief historical background of the modern religious conservative fundamentalist movement in America. This background will trace the movement's evolution from fundamentalism to political activism and highlight some reasons for why this has happened.

The rise of the modern religious conservative fundamentalist movement saw its beginnings in the work of Billy Graham. William Martin, in his book, *With God on Our Side, the Rise of the Religious Right in America*, states that before Graham, "The religious right was dominated by figures like Carl McIntire, a war-horse who was good at many things but best at spreading hate."<sup>1</sup> McIntire preached a doctrine that stressed the evil world was beyond redemption. As Garvey notes, religious fundamentalists will turn to politics if they feel threatened by government attempts to expand the public sphere. Subsequent to the 1950's, conservative fundamentalists felt no real threat from secular society at large and therefore had little need to concern themselves with politics or matters outside their communities. Consequently, McIntire's preaching went unnoticed.

During the 1950's, a general trend of permissiveness appeared to be growing in America. To religious fundamentalists, this trend signaled a disturbing moral shift that,

left unchecked, could lead to a spiritual deterioration in the United States. Unlike McIntire, who preached that the world was beyond saving, Billy Graham thought that it was wrong to turn one's back on the world, and believed that Christians had a moral responsibility to improve society.<sup>2</sup> This thinking serves to illustrate the first inkling that perhaps religious conservatives were feeling more compelled to venture outside their religious communities and make their voices heard.

For the most part, however, the political issues of the day still focused mainly on foreign policy rather than social reform. Americans were united in their efforts to stem the tide of communism, regardless of whether or not they were Christians. Issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and any large scale increase in government interference had not yet emerged as high priority political issues to alarm fundamentalists. As a result, Graham felt no need to involve himself politically and restricted his comments to the pulpit and his political activities to social visits at the White House. Graham's message eschewed political activism and spoke of turning to the Bible and religious traditions as a way to improve society.

It was not until the 1970s that religious conservative fundamentalists made their first serious attempts to translate religious convictions into social action and political power. The tumultuous 1970s gave rise to a multitude of social issues, any of which could have prompted religious conservative fundamentalists to forge their way into politics.

The issue most identified with the modern religious conservative movement is abortion. However, it was not the 1973 Supreme Court (of the United States) decision, *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion, that first sparked religious conservative fundamentalist political action. Legislation adopted by the Carter Administration was the turning point

that spawned the first organized movement of religious conservative fundamentalists. The legislation stated that, in order to keep their tax exemption, Christian and parochial schools must prove they had not been established to preserve segregation.<sup>3</sup>

The religious conservative fundamentalist movement had previously consisted of a conglomeration of individuals and organizations. All of these individuals and organizations not only had theological differences, but differing issues and levels of political involvement as well. However, the threat of President Carter's legislation against Christian schools galvanized the movements around a common enemy—the Federal Government. As a result, individuals like Pat Robertson attempted to organize fundamentalists toward fighting the Internal Revenue Service.

Pat Robertson organized Washington for Jesus in 1980. Washington for Jesus, an organized march on downtown Washington DC, took place on April 29, 1980. The purpose of the march was to call for moral renewal in America. The event drew a crowd of over half-million religious fundamentalists. While the march was advertised as spiritual, it had unmistakable political overtones. Robertson called for a spiritual revolution and political action that would turn the nation back from the brink of disaster.<sup>4</sup>

Washington for Jesus was a big success for fundamentalists in terms of sheer numbers. Robertson's ability to successfully organize a mass movement of this size made him realize the political potential of a well-organized fundamentalist movement.<sup>5</sup>

In late 1980, riding on the success of Washington for Jesus, Robertson used the resources of his well-known tele-evangelist show, the 700 Club, and founded the Freedom Council. The Freedom Council became a fast growing grassroots organization with a budget of \$5 million a year.<sup>6</sup> It was able to reach approximately 15 million people a week.<sup>7</sup>

The Freedom Council set out to promote what it defined as pro-family legislation. However, its message, aimed toward establishing anti-abortion and pornography legislation, was defined within a narrow religious framework of good versus evil. Despite a following of over 15 million people, the Freedom Council lacked the political sophistication and unifying grassroots strength needed to successfully promote its political agenda. While fundamentalists might be regularly tuning into the televised 700 Club, and sending in large donations to the Freedom Council, these followers represented only a small minority of the voting public. Followers without precincts and voters were not enough to build a successful political movement.

Conservative fundamentalist sentiment was spreading rapidly by the end of the 1970s. It appeared that the number of people concerned that private matters were becoming more public was growing. The experiences gained with the Freedom Council opened the eyes of many religious conservative fundamentalists. Organizers realized the political possibilities available to an organization that could tap into this increasing wave of religious conservative sentiment sweeping the nation.

Religious conservative fundamentalists' feelings, that their traditional way of life was continuing to be pushed aside by the government, continued in 1980. Liberal politicians, interested in promoting legislation calling for such things as gay rights, legalized abortion, and relaxed rules concerning marriage and divorce were seen as contributing to a breakdown of society and the American family. Liberal legislative changes continued to fuel the fire that pushed religious conservative fundamentalists further into the world of politics.



The Freedom Council did not have the following or sophistication to survive politically. However, it would serve as the springboard on which the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition would dive, headfirst, into the political arena.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Martin, *With God on Our Side, the Rise of the Religious Right in America*, (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1996), 35.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p 35.

<sup>3</sup>Ralph Reed, *Active Faith, How Christians are Changing the Soul of American Politics*, (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1996), 105.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 107

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 107.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Moral Majority**

The Moral Majority, while short-lived, moved the religious conservative fundamentalist movement from a fundamentalist organization to a political one. In addition, the political lessons that leaders of the Moral Majority learned paved the way for the future success of the Christian Coalition.

The Moral Majority was led by Jerry Falwell, a Protestant Minister from Lynchburg Virginia. The size and prosperity of the Moral Majority at the height of its popularity are a question of debate. Membership and reported budgets vary depending on whether one is a conservative proponent or opponent. However, the fact that it was a very large and recognizable organization is undisputed.

The Moral Majority's political direction took the route of coercion. Garvey defines coercion as "the rejection of religious freedom."<sup>1</sup> He distinguishes between two types of coercion.

The first type of coercion forbids legalizing social behavior for either religious or secular reasons. In this instance, a society might accept a law or policy even if it has religious foundations. Garvey sites the campaign against pornography in America as an example. Not only do conservative fundamentalists support legislation to control

pornography, but other groups do as well. For example, secular feminists support it, not on religious grounds, but because they think it is degrading to women.

The second kind of coercion attempts to forbid behavior that people can only object to for religious reasons. According to Garvey, this represents the ultimate rejection of the public and private distinction because it seeks not only to bring religion into public life, but to eliminate the private sphere altogether. He notes that ambitious hard-core fundamentalists would prefer to stamp out all forms of dissent and establish an official religion for the conduct of its public affairs<sup>2</sup>. The Moral Majority's activities were demonstrative of this type of coercion.

Opponents of the Moral Majority would argue that Jerry Falwell's political goal was to establish an official religion in the United States and totally eliminate the public and private distinction. Proponents, on the other hand, would say that his agenda reflected the views of society at large. I would argue that Falwell did indeed lean toward the rejection of the public and private distinction in his political pursuits. I would further argue that it was this extreme position that led to the demise of the Moral Majority.

Jerry Falwell launched an aggressive anti-government attack, proselytizing that the increase in government power was leading to the moral decline of America. In addition to issues of abortion, homosexuality, and pornography, the Moral Majority called for such lofty legislation as legalization of voluntary school prayer and abolishment of the Department of Education.

The Moral Majority's reason for existence, as well as its social agenda, centered on a militant, Christian, Protestant ideology. Falwell thought it impossible to judge the goodness of a law unless it was defined within a religious framework. Members could be

viewed as “people who operate in the publicly known evangelical and fundamentalist worlds, who see themselves as members of those worlds, and who usually believe in inerrant scripture, assertive evangelization and salvation through Jesus alone.”<sup>3</sup>

The political goals of the Moral Majority were defined within a framework of Scripture and self-righteousness aimed at assuring followers a place in heaven. The basis for its political endeavors revolved around the belief that God is active in the world and laws that govern society should be based on the Bible. Falwell interpreted America’s decline in terms of God’s punishment being visited upon it. “God will not be mocked, for whatever an individual or a nation sows, that shall he also reap. America is not big enough to shake her fist in the face of a holy God and get away with it. Sodom and Gomorrah fell under the judgment of God, so did Israel, Babylon, Greece, Rome and countless other civilizations as well.”<sup>4</sup>

John Garvey maintains that fundamentalists tend to make more radical demands when they have a chance of winning. He states that the degree of coercion they seek will vary according to the level of pluralism within the society.<sup>5</sup> Falwell’s belief that his large following equated to having the American voting public behind him helps to explain the brashness of the Moral Majority’s demands.

The Moral Majority appeared to be unstoppable during the 1980’s. Fundamentalists were credited with Ronald Reagan’s stunning defeat of Jimmy Carter in 1980. As a result, they now felt they had, in President Reagan, the political clout needed to outlaw abortion, legalize school prayer, and end what they felt was religious discrimination by the government.

Fundamentalists swarmed into Washington and became a visible and vocal presence on Capital Hill. However, once in office, the Reagan administration announced that social issues would not be the priority, and few, if any fundamentalists were appointed to positions of influence. In addition, political opponents, as well as the media, began an organized campaign to diffuse the Moral Majority's power and oppose its legislation.

Why, in spite of all its power and influence did The Moral Majority fail to capitalize on Reagan's victory? Why was it so unsuccessful in translating political capital into social legislation?

Examining religious activism within an American democratic framework, it is not surprising that the Moral Majority's fundamentalist aggressiveness failed to achieve its desired social changes through political action. Three major reasons stand out as contributing to its failure.

First, Falwell's coercive tactics, advocating legislation based solely upon Protestant religious doctrine, made the American voting public uncomfortable. The Moral Majority's political views reflected only a small portion of the overall point of view of a diverse religious American society. Patrick McCormick states in his paper, *Religious Right and Wrong in America*, "Given the rich tapestry of beliefs and churches that has flourished in American Society, it seems ludicrous to assume that religion has but one voice in this country, or even that believers agree on basic moral, political or social questions."<sup>6</sup>

Second, while fundamentalists might reject the private versus public distinction, the majority of Americans do not. Even self identified conservative Protestants, that should have been sympathetic to the issues raised by the Moral Majority, were uneasy about mixing religion with politics. This fact became painfully clear to fundamentalists after Pat

Robertson's dismal presidential bid in 1988. Steve Bruce, in his essay, *Fundamentalism, Ethnicity, and Enclave* states: "Many preferred a secular politician who had some of the "right" positions to a born again tele-evangelist who had them all."<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the Moral Majority failed to achieve political success through coercion due to the fact that a stable democratic society provides the freedom for all people to participate in the political process. It was this freedom that gave rise to the Moral Majority, but that also contributed to its fall. Like physics, in politics, every action results in an equal and opposite reaction. The Moral Majority's extreme positions caused its opponents to react. The counterassault of the left began in the mid-1980s and resulted in the loss of the Senate to Democrats in 1986. The official demise of the Moral Majority came with Pat Robertson's presidential defeat in 1988. However, conservative fundamentalists' political failures continued into the early 1990's. Examples of their failures are the Bush administration's neglect of its social agenda and the adverse Supreme Court decisions concerning school prayer and abortion.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John H. Garvey, "Introduction: Fundamentalism and Politics," in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick McCormick, Religious Right and Wrong in America, *U.S. Catholic* 61, no.4 (April 1996): 45.

<sup>7</sup>Steve Bruce, "Fundamentalism. Ethnicity, and Enclave," in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 65.

## Chapter 5

### The Christian Coalition

Critics declared the religious conservative movement dead after Pat Robertson's Presidential defeat in 1988. However, as Larry Pahl notes in his paper, *The Growth of the Religious Right*, "What many people did not know is that Robertson used his bruises in the political realm as schoolmasters."<sup>1</sup> Pat Robertson applied the harsh lessons learned with the Moral Majority and went to work to revitalize and remobilize the religious conservative movement. The result was the birth of the Christian Coalition.

The Christian Coalition made its political debut in 1989. When it held its first meeting in Orlando Florida in 1989, it had fewer than five thousand members. The rally drew only six hundred supporters.<sup>2</sup> Today, it reports a membership in excess of 1.7 million, consists of almost two thousand local chapters across the country, and operates on an annual budget of \$25 million.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian Coalition has clearly moved toward the political direction Garvey defines as union, or an attempt to change the existing system rather than leave it. Garvey maintains that fundamentalists that move politically toward union do want to introduce an element of religion into public life. However, because they see themselves as being too out of step with the surrounding society, they will moderate their demands in an effort to achieve greater political success.<sup>4</sup> This is indeed true in the case of the Christian

Coalition. For example, rather than push for a constitutional amendment that protects the unborn, the Christian Coalition's strategy is to seek to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision through the appointment of pro-life judges, passing pro-life laws at the state level, and through the elimination of tax subsidies for abortion. It also has moderated its demands toward political candidates and will not deny or support a particular candidate based on a single religious issue.

Unlike the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition does not define its social agenda within a militant religious ideology. It speaks in terms of larger societal issues such as taxes, crime, government waste, health care and financial security. These are issues that concern the average voter regardless of whether Christian or non-Christian. Ralph Reed, the Executive Director of the Christian Coalition states: "There are some political issues that the Bible addresses in principle. But most matters must await the hereafter before they reach a final resolution." He goes on to say: "Political victory, no matter how fervently pursued, will not lead to the promised land"<sup>5</sup>

Rather than waging an anti-government attack, Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed have realized that, in order to gain support for its social agenda, the Christian Coalition must come to terms with American political reality. A single group operating in an exclusive fundamentalist world is not politically effective or viable. As a result, Reed now states that the Christian Coalition does not maintain a religious agenda, but a public policy agenda. It is an agenda that he says represents "a marriage of a sense of social justice with the practical world of politics."<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to gain legitimacy, the Christian Coalition has attempted to align itself with the Republican Party. John M. Swomley, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics, St.



Paul School of Theology, and Chairperson of the American Civil Liberty Union's Church State Committee, makes a much bolder statement and says, "The Christian Coalition is clearly functioning as if it were a political party. It not only supports and aids candidates, but its goal is to take control of the Republican Party."<sup>7</sup> Proponents of the Christian Coalition would argue that Swomley's statement is one of liberal paranoia. According to Ralph Reed, the goal of the Christian Coalition is not to control any party but, "to assume the role of a responsible player within the democratic polity, so that the voices of Christians will always be heard in public discourse."<sup>8</sup>

The Christian Coalition has realized that its power lies not at the national level, but in its ability to mobilize support at the grassroots. This grassroots strategy is proving to be very successful. For example, in nearly 500 local and state contests in which they have entered across the country, candidates backed by the Christian Coalition have won more than 200. Skipp Porteous, founder of the Institute for First American Studies, observes that "All these people they're electing are going to be working their way up. In 20 years, if they aren't stopped, they're going to be running the country."<sup>9</sup>

The Christian Coalition, has become a powerful political grassroots movement. Unlike the Moral Majority, it has been able to translate its influence into votes. It is an organization adept and comfortable with circulating in the secular world and has become skilled in the ways and means of politics. However, in order to gain the level of political power it now enjoys, it has had to adopt a strategy of moderation, cooperation and accommodation.

The Moral Majority pursued an aggressive fundamentalist agenda based upon religious doctrine. In comparison, the Christian Coalition has tempered its political

demands, broadened its social agenda, and aligned itself with the Republican party in an effort to legitimize itself and reach a larger voting audience.

While all of the above actions have strengthened the political power of the Christian Coalition, it has been at the expense of its religious fundamentalist identity. It has been forced to abandon the fundamentalist features that weakened the political power of the Moral Majority. The Christian Coalition's interests are not aimed toward gaining divine power, but political power. It is power not gained by preaching goodness, but through fundraising, lobbying, compromise and consensus building—activities not characteristic of a traditional fundamentalist movement.

Ralph Reed cautions that the Christian Coalition must “resist the temptation of political power instead of blindly pursuing it.” However, an examination of its actions to date indicates that this warning may have come too late. The Christian Coalition has rapidly moved out of the kingdom of religious fundamentalism and is operating in the realm of an American political special interest group.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Larry Pahl, *The Growth of the Religious Right* (masters thesis, Western Illinois University, 1993, rev 1995), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Reed, *Active Faith, How Christians are Changing the Soul of America*, (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup>John H. Garvey, “Fundamentalism and Politics,” in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>5</sup>Reed, 27.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 28

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Edd Doerr, “Religion” *USA Today*, July 1996, 30.

<sup>8</sup>Reed, 280.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Pahl, 3.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions**

The fact that there are many ways in which religious fundamentalism can be manifested is not surprising. All fundamentalist movements have varying religious traditions, cultures and histories. Coupled with politics, the relationship between these movements becomes even more complex. Such a relationship requires we take into account the particular form of government and social organization in which they are operating as well as tradition, culture and history .

While there are many differences, all religious fundamentalist movements share certain general tendencies. First, each wants to preserve its particular religious heritage. Second, each looks to their religious traditions for guidance in dealing with problems. Third, they do not propose new ideas, nor do they want to change their habits and beliefs in order to keep in step with changing times.

In the past, fundamentalists disdained political involvement. However, increasing government prominence within our social environment is perceived as a dangerous threat to the fundamentalist's religious identity. In response to that threat, fundamentalists are turning to various forms of political activity as a way to assure their religious survival. In America, the political activities of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have been conducted using methods of coercion and union, each yielding different results.

Comparing the direction and degree of political success between the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, it is evident that success within a stable democratic society such as the United States depends on moderation, accommodation and compromise. The Moral Majority's political agenda, based solely on religious doctrine and anti-government sentiment could not survive in a homogeneous society. In the United States, people eat, dress, work differently, and believe in many different Gods. In addition, there is the strong notion concerning the public and private distinction that exists in this country.

The public and private distinction is far from clear constitutionally. However, it appears to be perfectly clear in the minds of Americans that our Constitution draws a clear separation between church and state. The notion of the public and private spheres holds that "the government should exercise authority over those matters that concern everyone in common (the public sphere) but should refrain from meddling in the affairs that matter only to individuals, families, churches, etc. (the private sphere)."<sup>1</sup>

It is the perceived distinction between the public and private spheres that makes the fundamentalist's viewpoint appear contrary to our democratic way of thinking. A stable, pluralistic, secular and democratic society like America resists applying a doctrine of Christianity to public policy, especially using a strategy of coercion. Steve Bruce states: "In a religious pluralistic democracy, religious particulars have to be confined to the private world of the family and home. The only religious values that can be allowed in the public square are the most general and benign banalities that everyone can endorse."<sup>2</sup>

The Moral Majority roared onto the political scene like a lion but went out like a lamb. Jerry Falwell's fundamentalist rhetoric and tactics of coercion did indeed move the

American electorate, but unfortunately for the Moral Majority, it was in the opposite direction.

In comparison, the Christian Coalition has chosen a strategy of union. It has abandoned its fundamentalist identity, moderated its political demands, and moved to the middle. In so doing, it is fast becoming a strong political force.

Unlike Steve Bruce, who feels that religious particulars need to stay outside the realm of political activity, Ralph Reed views the Christian Coalition's political participation as neither surprising nor troubling. He states that the Christian Coalition has "mainstreamed the voice of faith through its political effectiveness, challenging the political system to confront issues of moral and transcendent significance that might otherwise be ignored or swept aside by purely economic reasons."<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Reed might believe that Christians are changing the soul of American politics<sup>4</sup> but, he also knows that this change can only be accomplished by politically powerful Christians.

Marty and Appleby's theses that fundamentalists' involvement in politics can alter their distinctive identity to such a degree that they often can no longer be defined as fundamentalist, is true in the case of the Christian Coalition. The Christian Coalition has been forced to sacrifice its fundamentalist identity for political power and influence. In so doing, it has melted into the American political mainstream and become one of the many special interest groups that represent the essence of American politics.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John H. Garvey, "Fundamentalism and Politics," in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed.

## Notes

Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>2</sup>Steve Bruce, “Fundamentalism, Ethnicity, and Enclave,” in *Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Vol 4. ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago Ill: University of Chicago Press, 199), 65.

<sup>3</sup>Ralph Reed, *Active Faith, How Christians are Changing the Soul of American Politics*, (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1996), 28.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, Book Sub Title.

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